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JAMES ROY MACBEAN

Politics and Poetry in Two Recent Films by Godard

The student revolt in France, and the general revolt it set off, have placed Godard's recent and perhaps most directly political films (Made in USA, Deux ou Trois Choses Que Je Sais d'Elle, Far from Vietnam, La Chinoise) in an electrifying new perspective. In particular, those who airily dismissed La Chinoise as detached, irresponsible toying with revolutionary ideas must now face the fact that people like Véronique have closed the Sorbonne—and that much else in France must now be "rethought from zero." As we go to press, we learn that Godard, active in the successful opposition to firing of Henri Langlois as head of the Cinémathèque Française, was also instrumental in closing the Cannes Film Festival as part of the protest movement sweeping all France.

"Words, words, words." Hamlet's reply to Polonius when questioned about his reading might well be the response one would make when questioned about two recent films by Jean-Luc Godard, for never has the cinema been so wordy as in *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle* (Two or Three Things I Know About Her) and *La Chinoise* (The Chinese Girl). Godard, currently preparing his sixteenth feature film, obviously is a man who knows exactly what he is doing. (If ever there were any doubts in this area, Godard's patient and penetrating answers to the myriad questions asked of him during his provocative four-day stay at Berkeley early in March, must certainly demonstrate the extreme consciousness which Godard brings to bear on every aspect of his film-making.) Nevertheless, the cinema-goer might very well wish that Godard had been a little more considerate of the

aural endurance of the audience before unleashing the torrent of words—and noise—which overwhelms the "viewer-listener" (one can no longer simply say viewer) of *Deux ou trois choses* and *La Chinoise*.

The former film is particularly taxing aurally, in that, firstly, the narration (by Godard himself, in a running commentary on the film and its making) is spoken in a barely audible whisper; secondly, all of the commentary and much of the dialogue is spoken off-camera or away from the camera, thus eliminating any real assistance from lip-reading; and, thirdly, both the commentary and the dialogue of the film are systematically covered—and often smothered—by the noise of construction machinery, low-flying jets, pin-ball machines, electric appliances, huge tractor-trailer trucks, etc. Consequently, the viewer-listener of *Deux ou trois choses* finds

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himself having to strain at every moment to pick up even two or three words in each sentence; and, then, if he has been diligent enough to catch two or three words, to attempt to assimilate the words and reconstruct the sense of what is said while trying not to fall behind the flow of words which continue to pour forth. And this procedure, itself very trying and very tiring, can only be undertaken by those who have a fairly fluent knowledge of French. What the others do during *Deux ou trois choses* is anyone's guess—especially when, as was the case at the Berkeley première, the film is shown without English subtitles.

But with Godard as with Hamlet, there's a method in the madness; and the aural strain on the spectator during *Deux ou trois choses* is very intimately and very calculatingly related to the subject matter of the film. Clearly, one of the "two or three things" Godard knows about Paris (the "elle" of the title) is precisely the fact that within such an urban metropolis a man simply finds himself unable to hear himself think, much less to hear anyone else think. Moreover, by making the spectator *experience* this alienation—through noise, among other things—of man from his own thoughts and from the thoughts of others, Godard succeeds in putting across a message in the way best calculated to leave its imprint on the spectator, for it is the spectator himself who realizes during the course of this film (if he has not realized it before) just how intolerable is this constant roar of noise in which we live in the modern city.

It is worth pointing out, by the way, that Godard's manipulation of the soundtrack in *Deux ou trois choses* is by no means a radical new departure for him: while it is true that he has always (or at least from *Une Femme est une Femme* on) relied heavily on direct recording of natural sound, he has also experimented a great deal with various ways of arranging, or composing, the raw material into what we might call "sound-blocks" of alternating levels of intensity. *Une Femme est une Femme*, for example, juxtaposes sound-blocks of a tremendous variety of sound possibilities—dialogue recorded in studio, dialogue recorded over natural sound,



Marina Vlady in UNE OU DEUX CHOSES . . .

fragments of music, entire songs, dialogue over music, silence, etc.—and in *Bande à part*, in particular, the soundtrack is no longer the harmonious counterpart of the visual image but is rather the audio counterpoint to the visual image.

This contrapuntal form of composition is developed most fully, however, in *Deux ou trois choses*, where Godard's insistent forcing of the spectator out of his normal passivity is carried out in a relentless flood of seemingly unrelated

images and sounds—of *signs*, both audio and visual—which, in the words of the main character, “ultimately lead us to doubt language itself and which submerge us with significations while drowning that which is real instead of helping us to disengage the real from the imaginary.” In short, Godard both tells us and shows us, in *Deux ou trois choses*, that we in western civilization are adrift on a sea of significations, victims of our own signs, the only escape being to sink or swim—to drown in *non-sense* or to struggle for *sense*.

One of the main problems, then, in the struggle for sense, is the problem of endurance: At the beginning of the film, presumably, everyone (or at least everyone who knows some French) will be willing to *try* to hear the words and assimilate what is said, but over a period of more than an hour and a half, with only occasional and very brief “rest-stops” (snatches of Beethoven’s last string quartet and, once or twice, a few precious moments of sweet silence), it seems unfortunate but inevitable that, sooner or later, a certain portion of the audience is going to sink (or, as happens, simply walk out), exhausted and exasperated by the constant struggle to separate words from noise, sense from non-sense.

One might be tempted simply to ignore the often unintelligible dialogue and commentary, and to look for sense exclusively in the visual image; but perhaps it is not until and unless the spectator begins to understand how noise, in the context of this film, makes sense—how noise in this film does not impede sense but rather is a vehicle of sense—that the film as a whole can begin to emerge from the bewildering complexity that is at first glance deceptively similar to non-sense. The act of confronting the bewildering complexity of modern urban society and of learning two or three things about it, is, after all, the not so easy task which Godard himself has undertaken: is it then asking too much of us, as we confront the complexity of his film, that we, in turn, attempt to learn two or three things about cinema?

This double action—of analyzing society and

how it works, and at the same time analyzing art and how it works—is precisely the double action of *Deux ou trois choses*, a film in which Godard *qua* sociologist scrutinizes the “social pathology” of the modern city at the same time that Godard *qua* film-maker scrutinizes the cinematic means of transposing the social analysis into art. Moreover, in the whispered commentaries in *Deux ou trois choses*, we hear, or overhear, as it were, Godard questioning himself (as he does in *Far From Vietnam*), both as sociologist and film-maker, as to whether these are the right images, the right words, and whether his perspective is from too close or from too far. In short, *all* is put in question in *Deux ou trois choses*: the impersonal cruelty of Gaullist neo-capitalism; the prostitution, in one form or another, of the modern city-dweller; the American imperialist aggression in Vietnam; the fragmentary assimilation of culture in a society flooded with paperback books; the thousand and one amenities of modern life (radios, beauty salons, super-sudsy detergents, the latest style in dresses, and the modern bathroom plumbing still unavailable to 70% of the French people): *all* is put in question, including, and, perhaps, especially, the notion of cinema.

Godard, it is clear, wants a revolution in both art and society; and he hopes to make his contribution to the revolution of society by accomplishing, in film, the revolution of art. It is this double action that Godard advocates when he speaks (as he does in a recent *Cahiers du Cinéma* interview) of the need to “struggle on two fronts”—an idea he seems to develop more fully in his fourteenth film, *La Chinoise*.

Godard has very often acknowledged that in his view art is a very serious matter with a most important role to play in the social revolution which he sees taking place today in western civilization. Moreover, Godard’s art (like Gide’s *Les Faux Monnayeurs* or Hamlet’s play-within-a-play) is very calculatingly constructed of a most disquieting mixture of the fictional and the real; and one of the dominant refrains that haunt *La Chinoise* is the Hamlet-like assertion that “art is not the reflection of reality, but the

reality of the reflection." There is, indeed, something very Hamlet-like in Godard's hyper-lucid introspection, in his intense desire to understand a situation and at the same time to act upon it and influence it; in his genuine desire to commit himself to the social and political life around him and in his aesthetic inclination to maintain an ironic distance from that life, to play with words, to pun, to mimic, to jest. But where Hamlet found these two attitudes incompatible and the wavering between them inimical to an active life, Godard seeks to resolve the dilemma, not by eliminating one or the other of its horns—social commitment and aesthetic distance—but by jealously guarding them both in the creation of a work of art, like *La Chinoise*, that is at the same time sincerely and sympathetically committed to social revolution and yet ebulliently ironic in its insistence on delineating the sometimes infantile and dangerous excesses of the very heroes and political stands with which he, Godard, and we, the audience, may sympathize and, perhaps, identify. *La Chinoise*, like all of Godard's films, contains within itself its own self-critique: it is social thought and the critique of social thought, art and the critique of art. For an audience accustomed to having their politics and their art be one thing only—serious or funny, pro or con, tragedy or comedy—*La Chinoise* must indeed be very perplexing; but it would be a grave mistake to reduce this film, as some viewers seem to do, to one category or another—hilarious spoof or dead-serious militance, insouciance or hard-line propaganda, aesthetic diletterantism or didactic non-art. Godard, one should have learned by now, cannot be explained away so easily; and his well-known taste for contradictions might better be understood as the ability to achieve a dynamic balance amid seeming oppositions.

Godard is, in many ways, a Hamlet who has found his calling: he is Hamlet as playwright, Hamlet as artist. It is art which enables Godard to achieve and maintain that dynamic balance; and, conversely, it is his intense desire to achieve such a harmony amid seeming discord which brings him inevitably to art. As Godard himself

puts it in *Deux ou trois choses*, the goal of achieving a new world in which both men and things will know a harmonious rapport—a goal both political and poetic—explains, in any case, the rage for expression of Godard the writer-painter, of Godard the artist. Hamlet, too, one will recall, knew that art and politics could serve one another, that art could be the mousetrap for the conscience of society; but Hamlet staged only one play and from then on attempted to deal with life "directly," without the mediation of art, whereas Godard stages play after play after play, and deals with life by dealing with art.

In *La Chinoise*, this interplay between art and life, between reality and the reflection of reality—and, most important, the inevitable interdependence and overlapping of the two—are expressed dramatically in the memorable sequence early in the film when the young actor, Guillaume (played by Jean-Pierre Léaud), begins by reciting in very traditional style several lines from a text he is rehearsing, then stops short, grins, and, in answer to a question unheard by the audience (again, it is more or less whispered by Godard himself), acknowledges that "Yes, I am an actor" and then launches into an impromptu monologue on the dilemma of an actor committed to social revolution. At the close of this scene, however, Guillaume protests vigorously that one must avoid the temptation not to take his words seriously just because he is an actor performing in front of a camera, and he insists that he is sincere. At this moment we are suddenly shown a cameraman (Raoul Coutard) who has been filming Guillaume's speech and who is, in turn, now filmed himself in the act of filming the actor Jean-Pierre Léaud for the film we are presently watching. However, Godard's use of this complex procedure evokes little, if any, of the Pirandellian confusion of illusion and reality, but emphasizes rather the very Brechtian paradox that the film-within-a-film, like the film itself, must be seen not only as a work of art, but, like all art, also as an activity engaged in by very real people who may be sincerely committed to the ideas

they are acting out in artistic form. As Godard explained when answering questions from the audience in Berkeley, Guillaume is an actor committed to the revolution who hopes to make his contribution to the revolution by *acting* in a revolutionary way in revolutionary films and theater. In this sense, Guillaume's revolutionary activity with the Marxist-Leninist cell is not so much a *secondary* activity as it is a *corollary* activity of the committed art he practices as an actor. In short, Guillaume is a revolutionary actor acting for the revolution; and this, too, seems to be what Godard is getting at when he advocates the "struggle on two fronts."

Godard recently indicated (in the *Cahiers* interview mentioned earlier) that he was interested in the film-maker's opportunity to create, in his own modest way, "two or three Vietnams in the heart of the immense empire of Hollywood-Cinecitta-Mosfilm-Pinewood, etc., and economically as well as aesthetically—that is to say, in struggling on two fronts—create national and free cinemas that are brothers, comrades and friends." From this statement and from others like it, we can see that Léaud's role in *La Chinoise* as a revolutionary actor acting for the revolution, is, in a very real sense, the role which Godard believes is the most authentic role he himself can play as a committed artist.

This problem of the artist's particular kind of commitment arises again in *La Chinoise* as we witness the intense dialogue in a train compartment between Véronique and Francis Jeanson, the deeply committed colleague of Jean-Paul Sartre at *Les Temps Modernes*, who was in the forefront of political agitation in opposition to French colonial rule in Algeria at the time of the Algerian uprising. Jeanson, in *La Chinoise*, willingly puts himself in what is for him the rather paradoxical position of seeking to oppose or at least restrain the revolutionary activities advocated by the young would-be terrorist played by Anne Wiazemsky. Jeanson senses acutely—and very visibly—the uncomfortable paradox of his position *vis-à-vis* the younger generation of radicals, but he argues sincerely and penetratingly—and with a wonderful feel-

ing of warmth and genuine personal concern for his youthful student—as he attempts to make her realize the need, first and foremost, of creating a solid base of mass popular support for social change. Without this popular support, he points out, his own revolutionary activity in the Algerian crisis would have been futile—if not impossible; and it is precisely this need to create popular support for social change which involves Jeanson at the moment in a project designed to bring revolutionary theater to the people in the provinces.

Once again, the notion of the revolutionary actor acting for the revolution seems to be the artist's way of carrying on the "struggle on two fronts"; but even here, in presenting what is essentially his own view—and what he believes to be the only authentic role for the artist in contemporary France—Godard's extreme honesty, sincerity, and penetrating lucidity force him to acknowledge, as we see in the scene with Jeanson, that the artist's position will inevitably appear an equivocal one, for the militant activists will never consider the artist's contribution bold enough or even of any real significance in the revolutionary struggle; and the artist's particular way of committing himself will always contain a hint, or more than just a hint, of self-interest, in as much as the artist continues to pursue his artistic career while at the same time claiming to align his art with the revolutionary cause. In both of these respects, then, it is understandable that in spite of Jeanson's obvious sincerity and the excellence of his arguments, we find it difficult to listen without slight annoyance, slight embarrassment, or both, when he speaks of the way his little theater troupe will enable him to engage in social action and at the same time enable him to get away from Paris where he no longer finds himself able to concentrate on the books he is writing. "In going to the provinces," he explains with enthusiasm, "I'll be able to carry out this social action and, moreover, carry on my writing at the same time."

It is hardly surprising, however, that Jeanson's arguments—however right they may be—

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do not dissuade Véronique from advocating, and then committing, acts of terrorism. The artist can speak of the "struggle on two fronts" precisely because for him there are two fronts—art and society—but for the ordinary individual (like Véronique, Yvonne, or Henri—the young man expelled for "revisionism") there is only the single front of a world which is not right, of a world with something rotten at its core, of a world which must, in one way or another, be taken apart so that it can be reassembled in a better way. While the artist can create on paper, on canvas, or on film, a new and "perfect" world (and, in so doing, perhaps encourage others to attempt to create a new world in real life), it seems that the dirty work of going out and attempting to create this new world in real life falls inevitably to the ordinary individual who deals directly with life—without the mediation of art; and it is the ordinary individual who, no matter how much he may be encouraged by the example of "committed art," must bear the burden of the fact that a bullet fired in reality takes a man's life, whereas a bullet fired in a film is art.

Hamlet, himself, one will recall, found great sport in creating a work of art (his play-within-a-play) in which the king was murdered; but the same Hamlet found it well-nigh impossible—in spite of the best of reasons—to kill the king in real life. The ordinary individual, given this predicament, can react in many ways, the two poles being either to sit back, do nothing, and, like Hamlet, complain that "the time is out of joint. O cursed spite that ever I was born to set it right" or, like Véronique in *La Chinoise*, he can accept the consequences of setting it right and go out and shoot somebody. These, however, are the extreme positions, and Godard, in Berkeley, admitted that while he himself would never take up a gun, he now felt that he had to support those (like the North Vietnamese, or Régis Debray, or Che Guevara, or the Black Panthers) who, in the name of positive social reform, were willing to pick up a gun and if need be, use it. Godard also expressed admiration for a society like China which he sees, with



Anne Wiazemsky in *LA CHINOISE*

the advent of the Red Guard youth movement, as virtually turned over—lock, stock, and barrel—to the young people between fifteen and twenty-five years of age. As Godard puts it, "there are lots of things in this world that would be better off if they were turned over to the young people who have the courage to start again from zero."

This notion of starting again from zero (which was Juliette's conclusion at the end of *Deux ou trois choses*) recurs repeatedly in *La Chinoise*: Véronique wants to close the French universities so that the entire notion of education can be rethought from zero; she would bomb the Louvre and the Comédie Française so that painting and drama can likewise be rethought from zero; and Guillaume pushes his own investigation of the nature of theater to a notion of "The Theater of the Year Zero"—which is visualized cinematically by a shot of two individuals (an older woman in a sort of bathing suit and a young girl nude) knocking on either side of a large panel of transparent plexiglas through which they can see each other but which separates them—an image, perhaps, of

the first primitive nonverbal efforts to communicate between one human being and other. Moreover, this notion of starting again from zero is implicit in the fact that both in subject and form, *La Chinoise* is a film of revolution, a film which traces the progress of movement around the circumference of a circle until one completes the circle and returns to the point of departure. There is a strict logical sequence (as an intertitle states in announcing the film's final shot) which demands that the film end with the same shot with which it began—the shot of the balcony of the activists' apartment.

In beginning and ending at the same point, the film itself can be said to undergo a complete revolution; but to say that the film ends at the point of departure is not to say that the action within the film accomplishes nothing. On the contrary, it is the action within the circle which permits the return to the point of departure and the opportunity to start again from zero. The opening and closing shots of the film, although they contain the same shot of the balcony, reveal very different actions and attitudes within the development of the film-narrative. In the opening shot, we see the balcony with its bright red shutters opened, and we hear, and then see, a young man (Henri) reading aloud a number of quotations from the "Little Red Book" of Chairman Mao. Then, as the film unfolds, Henri is seen to be the character who develops the least, the one who adheres most rigidly to the French Communist Party line, the one whose attitude remains static (and it is significant that Henri is the one character—aside from Kirilov, who is also extremely rigid—who is always filmed in static shots without cuts).

In the closing shot of the film, we see the same balcony, at that very moment being re-occupied, so to speak, by the bourgeoisie—represented by the girl whose parents have let Véronique use the apartment during the summer vacation. The girl scolds Véronique for having made such a mess in the apartment and tells her it must be cleaned up before the return of her parents. Finally, Véronique is left alone

on the balcony with the parting advice to "think over carefully all that she has done." As Véronique leaves the balcony and closes the red shutters, we hear her unspoken thoughts explaining that she had already thought over her actions, that the end of the summer means the return to the university and the continuation of the struggle for her and for her comrades, and that she has now realized that the summer's activity with the Marxist-Leninist cell, which she originally thought represented a major breakthrough in revolutionary action, represents, in reality, only "the first tiny step in what would be a very long march"—words taken by Godard from a speech by Chou En-lai. Thus, the sequence of events that began on the balcony with Henri mechanically reading quotations from Mao comes to an end on the same balcony with Véronique thinking out for herself the realization that what she has done is merely a beginning in an ongoing struggle ten thousand times longer. As Godard indicates in the final intertitle, the end of the sequence of events that comprises the film is only "the end of a beginning."

For Godard, himself, one has the impression that the end of each new film is only "the end of a beginning"; and it is clear that as Godard develops as a film-maker, more and more, with each new film, he is putting into question both the entire notion of western civilization and the entire notion of cinema. He has often remarked that when he made *A bout de souffle* (his first feature), he had lots of ideas about films, but that now, after making more than a dozen of his own, he no longer has any ideas about films. This confession, however, should not be taken as an indication of despair; rather it is for Godard a genuine liberation. He is clearly a man who has the courage, as well as the will, to start again from zero—and to do it every time he makes a film. Even Hamlet, after all, despite his hesitations, managed at last, even if inadvertently, to wipe the slate clean and enable Denmark to start again from zero. "Readiness is all," he proclaimed. Godard, at the end of *La Chinoise*, seems ready.